ART RECESS 2

POETRY AND MORE

Feature Poet Interview: Chris McCabe (London, UK)

By e-mail exchange, Autumn 2005

Adam Fieled: 'You use a lot of humor in your poems. It's an all-purpose kind of humor that can be directed any which way— towards George W. Bush, for instance, or towards yourself, or towards the act of creating a poem. How much of this is conscious? Do your favorite poets tend to be "cut-ups"?'

Chris McCabe: I've never really thought of myself as using humor, in the sense of a deliberate, literary device which attempts to have an effect on a reader. It seems obvious to me that poems that set out to be funny, once you've identified the poet's intentions, fall flat and fail. The traditional vehicle for the 'humorous poem' is narrative, which doesn't interest me at all: I'm much more interested in fusing together the seemingly disparate, crude bathos, clashes of cultural registers and any other shock tactics that can, first and foremost, surprise me as the writer. Dr Johnson's comment that Donne took "the most heterogeneous ideas and yoked together by violence" is relevant here. Being from Liverpool (a city famous for its humor) and writing poetry, strangely doesn't offer any legacy in terms of a more challenging poetics. The territory ends with McGough and The Mersey Poets and all that ponytailed tweeness. A lot of my poems seems to come about through the making of a connexion, for example George W. Bush & the Wizard of Oz, which interests me more than attempting to get a laugh. Obviously, humor can be used as a kind of survival tactic (certainly in Liverpool, a blinker against the memory of the slave trade), a communal ethic of moving on. There's no great theory to this, but things are either funny to me because they make me laugh or because it generates a response against something that scares the living shit out of me. It was only five days after the recent London bombings when I heard the first joke made about it on television. It was a huge tension reliever. In this sense, the politic poems that I've written have probably used humor as a way of dealing with The Fear.

My favourite poets all tend to use speed (harder, quicker, faster) as an element in their writing, but I wouldn't say they are distinguished by "cut-ups." Dadaism was an incredibly important movement, and one I go back to from time-to-time, but the idea of using this technique without some interesting form of intervention has probably had its day. I'm more interested in the effect that television has had on the development of the minds of people of my generation (the MTV generation) and the ability

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this brings to be able to soak up great streams of images and messages and still be able to read them critically. Poetry as a potentially more meaningful form of channel-hopping. Randomness and synchronicity is the everyday experience of dealing with life in the city and there's little chance of a slow, closed, conventional poem doing much for anyone who's just spent a few hours trawling the internet on broadband. Memetically our minds have been altered by these massive cultural shifts and I feel that poetry needs to change to retain the capacity to surprise and capture the imagination.

AF: You've published your first book at a relatively young age. As a fellow twenty-something poet, I was wondering if you could talk about how it feels to be playing what's traditionally seen as an old man's game. Have you felt your youth to be a liability or an asset?

CM: Age seems to work on a different dimension in the poetry world, with poets under the age of forty usually being classified as 'young'. In a recent Poetry Society-sponsored Next Generation promotion (the corporate spawn of the original Pod People) the cut off age for a young poet was, I think, 55! In relation to that I suppose I'm comfortably in the young bracket, though I've had an extra 10 years to think poetry through and make decisions on which direction to take it than, say, Rimbaud or the MacSweeney of 'The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of his Mother.' They are examples of precociousness on a preternatural level. I think the reality is that, although poetry has been traditionally an 'old man's game' (this of course refers to the centuries of closed doors to women writers) much of the best poetry that's been written has been done by young poets. The argument booted against young writers is that they haven't got the life experience to actually have anything meaningful to say. This may be true if you're interested only in a confessional, story-based, wizened kind of writing, but if poetry's going to come directly from the poet's experience in life — sourced by the fabric of a variety of culturally experienced factors —then it's in youth that the future is embraced and the past not held close as a personal Golden Age. What comes next is valued more than what went before. This appeals to me as I'm interested in poetry of the present tense as opposed to a poetry that foists a nostalgia for the past. It's also the case that younger writers can draw from developments and new directions in technology, music, film and, of course, the language itself, that might strike older poets as alien.

There's nothing more detrimental to a poet's output than the self-assurance that comes with certain publication. Poetry's dominated by staid, complacent poets living off the glory of successful, earlier work. They don't need to push themselves as middle-of-the-road stuff will do. They won't take chances as this might lead to their publisher actually reading their work and becoming critical of it. Of course there are exceptions to this, and I've got great respect for Geoffrey Hill and late-career risk-taking of 'Speech! Speech!' and 'The Orchards of Syon'. Resonant, meaningful work that smacks of nowness. There are also exceptions to publishers and SALT, the publisher of 'The Hutton Inquiry', are interested only in the merits and energy inherent in the body of work itself. This might seem like an obvious starting point for larger poetry publishers, but SALT are something of an exception – at least in the UK.

In terms of getting published in the first place youth is a real liability. Mediocre work by an established poet will nearly always be published before more exciting work by an unknown. However, if you're trying to write because you believe in the work, for the sensation of pinning down the never-before-said and in attempt to push the boundaries of poetry as it's understood, then youth is a distinct advantage. This doesn't mean that you've got less to lose though. Paul Morley talks in 'Words and Music' of how trying to create the genuinely new when you start off in a band is far more risky than changing direction when you've got 'a name': you don't risk giving up a reputation, you risk never having one in the first place. The same could be applied to young poets. If you can deal with this possibility though, then it's as a young writer that you'll have the energy, playfulness, insight and rebellious capacity to attempt to forge out a distinctive kind of poetics. The ultimate aim would be to keep such a fresh outlook and perspective throughout an entire writing life.

AF: Your "Progress Poems" work on many levels. They're frequently directed at specific individuals (often literary icons), and seem to play up the ironies inherent in "progressive thinking", but they could also be taken straight. Could you talk a little bit about how this series developed, at what point you decided to call them "Progress Poems", etc.?

CM: This sequence was named "progress poems" from its moment of conception, but at that point, it was to be only a temporary title i.e. 'work in progress'. There were a few stray directions in my thinking that seemed to come together at the same time, both poetically and politically. I was reading a great deal of very different poetry at the time and was thinking of ways in which it might be possible, if at all possible, to write something that might be genuinely 'new.' I was kind of conceding that every possible novel direction that poetry could take had probably already happened, and all that was left was to play around with the pieces. I didn't find this thought as deadening as I might have done and it seemed to free up and, in a way, liberate the decisions that I could make when putting together what I considered to be a poem. I wrote the poems between January and about September 2003, following closely (with everyone else) the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq. It was insane how often the word 'progress' was used during this time, by both Blair and Bush, to justify their moral-ethical crusading. The more convinced they seemed of taking the world into a better place the more obvious it was — or at least it seemed, to everyone else — how dangerous and corrupt was their ideology. It set me off on the notion of progress as that ideology arrogantly put forward by the powers-that-be of every generation to justify their own idea of themselves as ultimately modern and to further their own careers. That the notion of everyone together moving forward in a society at any one time is a fallacy. The Industrial Revolution would be a classic example of this: the nine year old boy under the factory machine in 1803, asleep with nine blackened fingers on his hands. I started to collect quotes from all kinds of people from different periods on the idea of 'progress' and to put them together to see what patterns came about. The sequence starts with some of these. My favorite was the Tony Blair one: "the great thing about the human spirit is that it never gives up and that is how we make progress." This very surreal time in history was a mind-fuck for me in that my Dad was very ill with cancer (the book is dedicated to his memory), and when I look back at this sequence there is a kind of manic energy to these poems that I can't quite account for.

In terms of the form for these poems I suppose I just wanted to show myself that a poem could come about from anything at all (bar nothing). Inspiration is what happens when you make connexions. I gave all of the poems random numbers between 1 and 2,000 and pictured the whole sequence as an internet search engine response to the word 'progress.' As there's no place to progress to, the sequence would be randomly jumbled and might suitably disappear up its own arsehole. I might get lucky in the trawl though and if not write something genuinely new, at least write something I could call a 'poem' (I saw Charles Bernstein's 'The Sophist' for the first time after I'd finished these poems and really identified with the idea of a book of poems containing multitudes of genres). The first publication of the poems was fitting for its composition. The poet Peter Philpott took a group of about 20 poems for his ezine GreatWorks and jumbled them into his own order. He later added another 50 or so poems and put them into numerical order, which as they weren't written or planned to be like this, was also a kind of randomness. I've enjoyed doing readings since then in which I've flicked through the sequence and read any random poem that I've landed on, then moved on to lucky-dip another. The strange interrelations and juxtapositions that have come about from this have interested me although it is also possible that I've inadvertently undercut my own project with more subconscious patterning in the poems than I realized.

AF: Where publishing is concerned, print vs.online seems to be the big debate now among younger poets. Where do you stand? Having been in a lot of online journals (Argotist, Great Works, etc.), do you find online publishing satisfying?

CM: I'd say that, broadly speaking, there's a further division among younger poets based upon the kind of poetry they're writing. This is in no way a truism but in my experience I have found that the more open-ended and experimental the poetry, the more the potential of cyberspace will be embraced. This is obvious in a way: if you hold the conventional close then you're probably likely to reach for conventional methods of publication (i.e.printed matter). There's also a certain inverted logic among technophobic poets that because 'anyone' can make a website, then publishing poetry online isn't really publishing at all. It might not occur to them that with Desk Top Publishing within reach of the average western poet, anyone can make a book as well. What publication in either place will come down to is the judgement of an editor, which doesn't (or shouldn't) change depending on the medium.

What the web offers is instantaneousness. If somebody should want to read my poetry they don't have to find out the publication details, publisher, ISBN, order the book and wait for it to arrive on their mat. I can give them a URL, mail them a link, and it's there in front of them asking for no VISA details. The speed is there without the comfort. What's often forgotten with books though is just what amazing pieces of technology they actually are. Diverse, compact, portable: I don't leave home without one. For me, both forms of publication bring different possibilities and it's never been a case of one against the other. The physical feel of a book (colour, weight, smell, sensations, portability) are certainly not threatened by a monitor and a clunk of plastic in your hand. What the internet does

offer though is not only a potentially much larger readership (especially compared to small print-runs of magazines) but also a much wider one. Online communities are based upon shared interests to the detriment of other obstacles, such as location, physical appearance and even language. What I've also found fascinating is the experience of somebody latching onto a poem because they are interested in its subject - its straightforward content - and not just because it is a poem. They would never have looked inside a poetry magazine or book to find it in the first place. Where your poems could only be browsed in book form, they can now be searched and weeded out by people with massively different interests. It's also worth pointing out to poets who are skeptical of poetry on the internet (who won't of course, be reading this) that there is a whole generation coming through who will look to the internet to find about contemporary poets. If you don't Google, you don't exist. Personally, I'm always hugely satisfied with being published online. No more or less than in book form. It means somebody's liked my work enough to go to the effort of getting it out there and that it then has the potential to be read by people. After the initital buzz of writing something you're happy with, these are the two most important things for a writer. Or should be anyway.

Here is Chris McCabe's feature on PFS Post.

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